Why Do We Separate Adults from Traditional-aged Students?

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Abstract

While accessibility issues may distinguish adults older than 22 from traditional-aged college *students*, an age-specific dividing line that distinguish them as *learners* cannot be justified. Adults do systematically change over time, but age does not ordinarily affect faculty selection of subject matter or teaching method. Practical, moral, and principled objections exist against subdividing adult learners by such developmental differences, even though they can impact learning outcomes. However, such differences can be easily accommodated when students become agents of their own learning, as when they are mentored in individualized studies. Rather than perpetuating a meaningless subdivision between young and older adult learners, we must give higher priority to creating personalized college-level studies for all.

Keywords: Adult development, Adult learning, Adult students, John Dewey, Mentoring

Why do the life circumstances that distinguish adult from traditional-aged *students* require that we make a similar distinction between adult and traditional-aged *learners*? Even though the particulars of the learning process can vary enormously among individuals, psychology considers the basic principles of learning to be universal. Moreover, adulthood itself is an amorphous idea at best, a socially constructed time of life that, today at least, begins at age 18 and continues up until death. Adults can be broadly distinguished from one another by various (presumed-to-be) age-related or developmental stages and by the ever-growing number and kinds of experiences that come with increasing age. However, stages are multiple, fluid, and complex; and experience, infinitely variable. So is it really necessary to draw a firm line between traditional-aged college students (18 to 22) and all others (see, e.g., Kazis et al., 2007)

We tend to draw such lines because of the two groups' different living situations. For example, it is largely only the traditional-aged student who lives on campus; most other adults do not. Having to commute to college clearly impacts how accessible higher education may be for older students. And many colleges, aware of the various barriers faced by their commuting (adult) students, have, in recent years, made strenuous efforts to address them. However, no matter how well these efforts may have improved the *physical* accessibility of the college for older students, it is not at all clear that new parking lots, multiple night classes, child care facilities, helpful staff available for longer hours, and, now, online advisement, library databases, and course offerings, have much to do with *intellectual* accessibility or enhanced learning.

When we met to discuss this issue at the March 2016 conference for the Adult Higher Education Alliance, we began our session by asking those present the following question: "If you've taught both traditional-aged and adult students, has your teaching been different for those two groups? If so, why?" In the lively discussion that followed, we heard repeated and heart-felt testimonials to the adult learner. Adults, we learned, have a different (and more positive) mind-set toward learning; perhaps because of their greater experience, they are eager for new information that meets their many and varied needs. They actively look for and find relevance in the materials presented. In other words, the participants argued, adult students are much more motivated to learn than traditional-aged students.

We therefore, might infer that adults are more in tune with the interests and goals of their adult instructors than are younger students. However, no one suggested that, as teachers, they used different forms of pedagogy with adult students. While college instructors (at least those at the conference) see older students as more amenable to learning and more enjoyable to teach, they did not report making any significant changes in resource materials, types of exercises, forms of discussion, or testing options when they worked with adults. The content of courses in Statistics or American History or Chemistry remained the same no matter what the student's age. Not only the subject matter, but it can be argued that also methodology and even educational philosophy are unaffected by age. When Carl Rogers, for

example, wrote many years ago about student-centered learning, it did not occur to him to apply his philosophy of teaching to only one particular age group. Indeed, in his first book, *Freedom to Learn* (1969), the first four chapters present four different instances of his singular approach to teaching, which were found in kindergarten, high school, college, and in advanced continuing education classes. Similarly, in his lab school, John Dewey showed how his principles of progressive education could be adapted to any grade (Mayhew & Edwards, 2007); and subsequent writers have gone on to show the relevance of Dewey's ideas in college and for adults (e.g., Coulter, in press; Elias & Merriam, 2005).

Dewey (1916) is especially relevant here. As he pointed out, learning is a process that is inherent to the human being. It takes place continually from birth until death. There are no age differences in the extent to which learners can successfully obtain, reflect upon, use, and evaluate information that relates to their needs and interests. The problem, as he saw it, is that the aims and purposes of formal education are not built around learner concerns. Instead, they reflect the needs and interests of professional scholars – i.e., teachers – and well-educated public intellectuals. As a result, students-as-learners are not their own agents, which seriously reduce their engagement with the material to be learned. When students are passive recipients of teacher-directed college studies, it also flies against the expectations and needs of a democratic society. But if, Dewey argued, education were redesigned so that it arose out of individual *learner* concerns, then, all that would matter from one year to the next is, not age, but awareness of their prior educational history. Thus, the age distinctions we make in higher education become particularly problematic since both groups – the 18 to 23 year olds and the older adults – ostensibly have the same educational background.[1]

[1] While younger and older adults may have different life experiences (e.g., younger students presumably are more aligned with the world of formal education whereas older students are more associated with the world of work), theoretically these differences would tend to privilege the younger students. In practice, however, as evidenced in our conference discussion, the traditional-aged students' academic advantage appears to be easily balanced by older students' greater motivation to learn. Moreover, the disciplinary focus of so many college courses tends to render student life experiences, no matter what their context, relatively incidental.

Since Dewey's time, however, much research has been devoted to delineating other kinds of age-related changes particularly with respect to such characteristics as personality, ego strength, psycho-social challenges, defense mechanisms, career orientations, self-expressiveness, morality, faith, perspective, and happiness, to name just a few (see Table 1). From the point of view of adult development, then, it makes no sense to lump all adults over 22 into a single category. It can be easily argued that adults 23 to 32 are as different from older adults 33 to 42 as they are from young adults, 18 to 22. Why not then subdivide all adult learners by their differences on these other attributes that have been identified by social scientists as especially meaningful and important?

For example, why not create a special curriculum and set of learning activities for social science learners at lower stages of "morality" (e.g.,Bjorklund, 2015, p. 283) that is different from what is designed for those at higher levels; or why not introduce evolutionary theory to biology learners with strong religious convictions that is different from how it might be introduced to such learners who are atheists; or why not create separate courses in philosophy for those students who claim to be happy and for those who identify themselves as anxious? It is not difficult to imagine how particular developmental stages or different levels of the myriad attributes that define the adult might seriously impact the quality and depth of what they are able to learn (e.g., Kegan, 1994). Research seems clearly to indicate the inverse: Higher education can affect both developmental growth (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Perry, 1981) and attribute change (e.g., Truluck & Courtenay, 2002).

Table 1: Various Developmental Theories

From Bjorklund, The Journey of Adulthood, 8th edition (2015)

- **Five factor theory of personality** (p. 243): The 5 factors = Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness. Data: e.g., with age, we become more agreeable and conscientious, less neurotic and open.
- **Erikson's theory of psychosocial development** (p. 255): 8 stages, each one a conflict that requires resolution – 4 or 5 stages occurring in adulthood. (9th stage in Erikson, 1982/97). Data: e.g., generativity (stage 7) higher at midlife than earlier or later.
- **Loevinger's theory of ego development** (p. 259): 7 stages (4 occurring in adulthood). Data, e.g., development is correlated with education (self-awareness decreases; conscientiousness and individualism increase).
- **Valliant's theory** (p. 261): based upon Erikson – looks at changes in defense mechanisms. Data, e.g., mechanisms employed become more mature with age (i.e., more consonant with reality).
- **Super's theory of career development** (p. 207): 5 stages of life-span career, 4 in adulthood (exploration, establishment, maintenance, disengagement)
- **Gutmann's gender cross-over effects** (p. 263): More fluidity in gender with age. Data, e.g., increased openness to expression of previously unexpressed parts of the self with age.
- **Positive psychology** (e.g., Maslow, Sligman, Csikszentmihalyi): One example – Ryan & Deci self-determination theory (p. 265). 4 stages of personal growth: happiness, competence, autonomy, relatedness). Data, e.g., graduates with personal (intrinsic) growth goals happier than those with only extrinsic goals.
- **Perry's theory of cognitive/emotional development** (1981): 3 main stages (12 levels in all) posting change from thinking in dualities to acquiring tolerance of uncertainty during 4 years of college.

In truth, even putting aside the sheer impracticality of such an approach in a traditional classroom, subdividing students by developmental stage or attribute difference is largely opposed by the academic community. College instructors define the scholarly disciplines they teach as a static body of knowledge that can be successfully inculcated regardless of individual differences among their students.[2] Moreover, many would question the appropriateness, even the ethics, of disciplinary experts assessing students on non-scholarly dimensions (see, e.g., Courtenay, 1996. And Dewey, believing

[2] As Rose (2007) quotes a colleague: "This is higher education, not adult education."

that schooling in a democracy rests upon diversity in the classroom, would deplore such separations on principle (Hansen, 2006). The most important point here is that these same objections can also be fully applied to the separation of adult students by age. One can argue either that age differences are irrelevant to the subject being taught or that such a separation is morally or philosophically questionable (e.g., Coulter & Mandell, 2012).

Therefore, it is quite ironic that when students are not taught in classes, but work independently with a personal faculty guide, individual differences, not only in each student's stage of development but in his or her prior experiences, as well as variations in academic skills, can be (and are!) readily taken into account. Historically, independent study as a routine practice was initially introduced specifically for adult students who were forced to study at a distance from the campus – i.e., who faced the physical inaccessibility issues so common with busy adults.

In reaching across that distance as a way of supporting them in their forced isolation, such "academic mentors" (Mandell & Coulter, 2016) could not but help come to know (and want to know!) these older students in ways not possible as classroom instructors. In other words, the mentoring relationship makes possible great flexibility in the selection of what topics to learn, what resources to select, and what learning activities to engage. Thus, independent-study learning experiences can be easily designed that address the academic strengths and weakness of individual students while also being built upon and around each one's own interests and concerns.

Without comparable contact with traditional-aged students, we mentors rarely question the assumption that individual differences among young students are not extensive enough to merit the kind of personalized learning experiences that mentoring allows. And yet, these "emerging adults" (Armett, 2000) are unquestionably as complex and diverse in experience and interest and in the range of questions that animate their lives, as any other group of adult learners. Indeed, (and perhaps this is something we "adult educators" are slow to recognize), it may be *because* of their varied states of immaturity, they have an even greater need to experience education as relevant to their own abilities, interests, and concerns, than nontraditional students.

Our position is this, We may have good reason to want to divide the world of college students into two age groups – the so-called traditional-aged students as distinct from the so-called adults – in order to preserve the distinction between those who live on campus (not incidentally, a minority nowadays) and those who live in the "real" world. However, we do not believe that we should therefore consider these two groups as two different kinds of "learners." They are not. They should be appreciated as a single group of highly diverse learners all seeking a higher education, with each person being viewed, as much as possible (and the challenges here are unquestionably large), as wholly distinct from one another.

There is no logical or empirical justification to assume that age is a key factor in determining what, how, and why a particular student engages a particular subject matter. If we are truly concerned with offering students of any age the opportunity to become engaged learners – importantly, a core belief in the "adult education" tradition (e.g., Kett, 1994) – we need to concern ourselves, not with age, but with the experience, knowledge, questions, and interests each learner brings with them to their college studies. Our role, indeed our responsibility, is to fight for the kinds of learning opportunities that can directly and meaningfully attend to such individual differences.

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